

HOMILY FOR THE CHRISM MASS

ST. DAVID'S CATHEDRAL CARDIFF

WEDNESDAY 12TH APRIL 2017

ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

On 22nd July Daniel Stanton will be ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Cardiff having studied at St. Mary's Oscott for the last six years. On 29th July, Peter McLaren will be ordained to the priesthood having served as a permanent Deacon for ten years. Robert James will be ordained a Deacon on 10th June and similarly Nicholas Williams on 24th June. We have two other seminarians in training for the priesthood and, hopefully, one new candidate starting in September.

It seems to me that we are not short of priests in this Diocese. The real shortage we face is shortage of people. Congregations are decreasing. Viability of parishes and schools will be an increasing challenge in the not too distant future. These new priests will have to minister in changing and challenging circumstances – not least in an age and culture which at times tries to airbrush faith out of the picture and at other times is hostile to the implications of religion.

We can hardly be surprised at the complex world in which we live, not least as we celebrate Holy Week. The story of these final days of the earthly life of Jesus contains all sorts of complexities and conflicts, full of puzzling characters who behaved in unpredictable and sometimes cruel ways. The man with the pitcher of water who

introduced the disciples to the equally anonymous owner of the house where the Last Supper would take place. How much do we owe for direction in our lives to those whose names we do not know or can't remember? Think of the disciples trying to use swords to defend Jesus. Think of Pontius Pilate trapped by his so-called authority as he washes his hands, denying responsibility, blaming others by this symbolic action. How common is the exercise of power without responsibility, not only in the public sphere but in our personal lives too.

Sometimes they strew his way,

And his sweet praises sing;

Resounding all the day Hosannas to their King.

Then 'Crucify!'

Is all their breath,

And for his death

They thirst and cry.

The story of Holy Week is our story, too, as we follow the journey Jesus makes to Calvary - and beyond. Sometimes we try to speed up the process, get to the end, find a meaning for everything here and now. We want to avoid the meaning of the cross in our own lives expecting no suffering or pain or disappointment should come our way. But there is no resurrection to new life without Gethsemane and Calvary. We kiss the wood of the cross on Good Friday as a sign

that we are embraced by Christ on the cross and we embrace the cross in our own lives as means of uniting our life and death to his.

The famous English novelist Agatha Christie wrote this paragraph in her autobiography:

“Quite unexpectedly one day (I think in the middle of a maths lesson) the teacher suddenly launched forth on a speech on life and religion. All of you, she said, will pass through a time when you feel despair. If you never face despair you will never know the Christian life. To be a Christian you must face and accept the life that Christ faced and lived. You must enjoy things as he enjoyed things; be as happy as he was at the marriage of Cana; know the peace and happiness that it means to be in harmony with God and God’s will. But you must also know, as he did, what it means to be alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, to feel all your friends have forsaken you, that those you love and trust have turned away from you, and that God himself has forsaken you. Hold on then to the belief that this is not the end. If you love, you will suffer, and if you do not love, you do not know the meaning of the Christian life. She then returned to the problems of compound interest and fractions with her usual vigour”.

Our new young priests will learn that their ministry is both untidy and glorious, painful and exhilarating, transcendent and frightening. There will be times of agony and ecstasy, of the cross and resurrection. Those of us who have been priests a long time will say to them “Hold on, this is not the end”. You will be strengthened and supported and inspired by the hidden lives and heroic dedication of

so many of the people you serve as a priest. And you in turn will be able to inspire, strengthen and heal them not least with the Holy Oils that we bless today. The Oil of Baptism reminding us that life is brought to its fullness in union with Christ through Baptism. The Oil of the Sick, which through which the hand of Christ and the prayer of the Church reaches out to heal broken body and spirit. The Oil of Chrism which signifies that each member of God's People is anointed to be prophet, priest and king with all that means.

As our new priests prepare to make vows of service at their forthcoming ordinations, those of us who will welcome them into the presbyterate in the next few months will now be asked to renew the vows we made at our own ordination for the glory of God and for the service of you, God's people. "Hold on, this is not the end".
